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ABSTRACT

A decade after "A Nation at Risk" three new reports raise concerns about American higher education. The Wingspread Report on higher education challenges institutions of higher education to assess their myriad activities to see how effectively they are "taking values seriously," "putting student learning first," and "creating a nation of learners." The California Higher Education Policy Center has issued several reports, including "The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System." This report surveys public opinion and finds respondents unhappy with the way colleges and universities are managing budget challenges by denying access and opportunity to a new generation of citizens. The third report by the Pew Campus Roundtable project is a summary of the "sense of meeting" notes taken during discussions held at 29 campuses throughout the country. These indicate that campuses are more concerned with community, than meaning, with survival than with mission and with today rather than with tomorrow. In particular the Wingspread report reminds the higher education community that the purpose of higher education is to develop character and citizenship as well as graduate students prepared for careers and commerce and that for the past 100 years American higher education has less and less emphasized this role. (Author/JB)

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ED 364 168

MEANING, MISSION, AND THE NEXT MILLENNIUM

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly a decade after "A Nation at Risk" raised alarm about American schools, three new reports raise concerns about American higher education. The Wingspread Report on higher education, prepared by a study group chaired by Former U.S. Senator William Brock, challenges institutions of higher education to assess their myriad activities to see how effectively they are "taking values seriously", "putting student learning first", and "creating a nation of learners".

While the Wingspread-Brock report is due in December, the report of the California Higher Education Policy Center directed by Pat Callan, former Commissioner of Higher Education in that state, has already issued several reports, including one entitled, "The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System". This report surveys public opinion and finds respondents unhappy with the way colleges and universities are managing budget challenges by denying access and opportunity to new generations of citizens.

The third report was released in mid-November by the Pew Campus Roundtable project of the Pew Memorial Trust, under the auspices of the Higher Education Program at the University of Pennsylvania. This report is a summary of the "sense of meeting" notes taken during discussions held at 29 campuses throughout the country. These notes indicate that campuses are more concerned with community than meaning, more concerned with survival than mission, and more concerned with today than tomorrow.

These three reports consider the role and condition of higher education as viewed by a group of opinion leaders concerned about the future of American society, as expressed by the general public concerned about opportunities for their children, and as conveyed by campus leaders concerned about external challenges to their institutions.

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THE WINGSPREAD REPORT

The report of the Wingspread Group on Higher Education, "An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education", is already controversial, even in its prepublication stage. A group of college and university presidents invited to review its executive summary and core sections reacted quite negatively to what they viewed as assumptions about the inadequacies of higher education and suggestions for a core curriculum as corrective action. Many of the presidents responded by saying that students these days attend so many different colleges before earning a bachelor's degree that the notion of a core curriculum is outmoded. It also was stated that the very notion of a core curriculum was "elitist", and that the emphasis in the report on a core curriculum and values had no meaning for adult students. The central section of the report, which consists of a series of questions for institutions to ask as a form of self-assessment were dismissed a "slippable" and not precise enough to challenge college and university faculties, who were viewed by most presidents as the only stakeholders whose opinions mattered.

By contrast, I found the approach of the Wingspread Report refreshing. In the sections I reviewed, there were no statements about technology or TQM, community or crisis, faculty status or football. Instead, the report begins with three questions posed by the late Howard Bowen more than a decade ago:

1. What kind of people do we want our children and grandchildren to be?

2. What kind of society do we want them to live in?

3. How can we best shape our institutions to nurture those kinds of people and that kind of society?

Based on their own consideration of these questions, and their discussions with corporate and elected officials around the country, as well as an intensive visit to one of the nation's largest community colleges, the Wingspread group concluded that change is needed in higher education and that significant change must come campus by campus. The group decided then to issue four challenges to each campus:

1. Assess itself against checklists concerning values, students as learners, and lifelong learning;

2. define and publish standards of entry and exit, and develop ways to measure progress;

3. develop a required core curriculum that provides or assures a coherent liberal education; and

4. assure that next year's entering students will graduate as individuals of character.

In fact, the group proposes no specific core curriculum; it simply suggests that institutions which award a degree must understand the meaning of that degree, whether the student graduated from the institution after two or four years of study, or after periods of study at numerous institutions, before finally qualifying for the degree at the awarding institution. The question then is what does the degree mean? Because of its concern about meaning, the group focuses on values.

The questions posed in the checklists are provocative and serve as a useful form of self-assessment. The report is forward-looking and more concerned about grandchildren than about competition, more concerned about meaning, mission, and the next millennium than about specific requirements, and more concerned about community as a by-product of shared purpose than as a goal in and of itself. The report argues that the faculty is not the only stakeholder and therefore faculty governance is no substitute for campus-wide planning. Finally, the report is a call for leadership of a type not exercised publicly in higher education for some years. It represents a "call to arms" for institutions to assert leadership and not be defensive about their role.

THE CALIFORNIA HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

"The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System", reports the results of a survey of public attitudes toward higher education and the extreme concern expressed about college costs and access. I found the section comparing public concerns

about quality in higher education and health care especially troubling. The public, in this survey, thought quality was not a major priority when thinking about higher education. Instead of reading this as an expression of confidence in higher education quality, I find it a negative sentiment that quality is not as a much a concern in the public's view as are issues of the price of tuition and the degree of access to admission and programs. The survey follows several years of dramatically reduced access in California and increasing costs of education nationally, and neatly summarizes the view that institutions of higher education have taken actions in response to reduced state support that are exactly opposite from what the citizens would want. Institutions reduced access; the public wants increased access to courses and programs, and expects institutions to provide increased access through productivity gains.

THE PEW CAMPUS ROUNDTABLE

The Pew Memorial Trust selected thirty college and universities to participate in local Campus Roundtables and then to join together in groups of six or seven institutions as clusters to discuss their common "problems." It was interesting to read the "sense of meeting" notes of our Ramapo cluster group and to hear the presidents of the thirty institutions discuss their concerns. The concerns really are quite universal across all the campuses and focus on planning and community. I found the draft summary of the notes, entitled "An Uncertain Terrain", especially worrisome. In contrast to the California study and the Wingspread Report, the campus discussions focused inward and are quite parochial in considering faculty governance to be equivalent to campus planning. In these notes, campuses seem to be more concerned about "community" as a goal than as a by-product of shared public purpose and values.

CONCLUSION

For the past one hundred years, American higher education has put increasing emphasis on the role of the faculty and the organization of knowledge, and less on the development of students and especially on the development of students as future citizens. The value of the Wingspread Report is that it reminds us that the purpose of higher education is to develop character and citizenship as well as graduates prepared for careers and commerce, yet many institutions seem to ignore the first half of this institutional mission.

The California study should cause pause for those of us in higher education. Nationally, campuses have managed major cutbacks in state and federal support by increasing class size and by reducing the availability of courses and programs. The public wants us to use new technologies to increase productivity and improve access. This seems entirely reasonable and not at all in consistent with the Wingspread Report. In fact, in these reports, only those on campuses seem out of step with higher education's meaning for citizens in the 21st century. I am pleased to report that Ramapo focuses on meaning and mission in preparing our graduates for the next millennium.

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